

COSTELLO, Diarmuid; WILLSDON, Dominic (eds.) (2008)

The Life and Death of Images

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The Life and Death of Images, co-edited by Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willson, is one of the many endeavours that have been attempting to rejuvenate the field of aesthetics in the recent years. The volume could be defined in the same terms that the book itself scrutinizes and focuses on, such as relational aesthetics, social practices of art and participatory action, since it reproduces at a different scale and in a different setting the procedures at work in today's art practice. That being said, it does not enlist a directory of articles by authors unacquainted with the other's concerns, but instead it brings them together in dialogue.

The main topic of the book is summarized in its title: how and/or whether we can talk about images in terms that would ascribe them attributes normally ascribed to living entities. The background against which this issue concerning the visual production is set forth is that of reclaiming the centrality of aesthetics for a pertinent debate of many major ethical questions. In a comprehensive introduction, the editors, Diarmuid Costello (professor of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art at Warwick University, vicepresident of the British Society of Aesthetics, and the author of a significant body of work on the philosophy of photography) and Dominic Willson (curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and formerly at San Francisco Art Institute, UC Berkeley and California College of the Arts) discuss the current state of aesthetics that calls for such an enterprise. The recent revitalization of philosophical aesthetics, allowed by a certain «waning» of the anti-aesthetic standpoint, made possible a refreshing discourse that put forward ways of thinking the intertwining of the

ethical with the aesthetic more productive than a bare reversal of the terms or their negation. This new aesthetic paradigm, that reconnects it to ethics, is mostly manifest today in three trends: 'the return to beauty', an attempt to repair its tie to the good and the just, or at times «a defensive formation against the explicit politicisation of culture»; the 'participatory practice' or «the re-emergence of art as social practice», an encompassing project launched in the late 1990s by the art curator Nicholas Bourriaud; and the 'engaged art', or the addressing by artists, once again, of the social and political problems (p. 11).

The first dialogue in the book is between J.M. Bernstein (Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at New School University) and Judith Butler (Maxine Elliot professor at the University of California at Berkeley). Bernstein's paper has a double departure point: Elaine's Scarry notes in *Beauty and Being Just*, and Freud's «Reflections upon War and Death». He challenges Scarry's claim that beauty has the ability to enliven us, since assuming «our daily unmindfulness of the aliveness of others» only indicates «that we have not been attending correctly» (p. 38). Then he ponders about Freud's view, occasioned by the imminent war, according to which we truly value life only when we are about to lose it, given that we normally «shelve» death out of life, as being the death of the other, never the death of the self. The same thing happens with beauty. In order to appreciate it, one has to incorporate the transience as an internal property of it. Consequently, the «violence of the natural sublimity» represents a «return of the repressed», an installing of death amidst the beauty and life itself

(p. 41). Alluding to Deleuze's example of Bacon's painting of a «violence of the sensation», Bernstein proposes the non-representational Matisse and his «pure violence» against representation. Matisse's paintings contain their «own moment of war within» themselves, achieving the modernist tragic «sublimity». Judith Butler responds to Bernstein pointing towards a certain disparity between Deleuze's Bacon and his Matisse, which might create problems for Bernstein's argument, but also to the fact that this might raise an obligation on the part of art to enliven us in the face of loss and death. In her essay she draws on Walter Benjamin's distinction between signs and marks: signs conjure, they are called upon, while marks manifest, «emerge from within», but only on living beings. Benjamin goes on to say about paintings that they are sets of marks, whereas their title, the conjured sign, represents the organizing intention that gives them a complete identity. But if the paintings are marks, they are like human beings, they have a *semblance* of human life. However, this semblance is also what prevents them from being works of art, Benjamin says, and in order for them to be so, they have to penetrate this semblance and beauty and «petrify» it (p. 68).

The second intervention is by Noël Carroll and Adrian Piper. Carroll, who teaches Philosophy at CUNY, raises up a hot issue, that of the autonomy of art. To his mind, the modernist project of art for art's sake brought about an unforeseen consequence, that of art becoming superfluous within a broader social context. One of the reasons autonomy was achieved, he says, was an internal rationale of the artworld, who tried to prevent extraneous interventions and/or censorship onto the artistic production. This coupled with a theoretical necessity on the part of essentialist philosophers of art, whose project supposed an exclusive definition of the value of art. Unfortu-

nately, it led to a severing of the liaisons that tied down art with people, or aesthetics with ethics. A reciprocal indifference issued from here. Taking up Adornian ideas such as the culture of entertainment, Adrian Piper, both a philosopher and an artist, maintains that the originality-aversive attitude prevalent in postmodernism set up a favourable environment for an indiscriminating proliferation of marginalized cultures, which resulted in a so-called «advertainment», a play of words from advertisement and entertainment (p. 122). She argues that the freedom of expression is not truly compatible with the idea of free market, since the market is actually promoting its own interests, therefore the freedom of expression is severely restrained. On a market ruled by capital, sustaining and controlling art at the same time can be a non-paradoxical proceeding. One of her strongest statements is that all art is political, explicitly or implicitly, but that only the explicitly political art is free in the sense that it works against the market. Carroll disagrees with this crossing out of the possibility of apolitical art — the fact that autonomy of art is not an ideal situation does not mean that it can be easily wiped out. Piper disagrees in turn with Carroll in what concerns the efficiency of the didactic role played by art, when art was supposedly a part of the civilizing ethos.

Thirdly, Thierry de Duve, art historian, curator, critic and professor at the University of Lille, brings up a recurring theme in his writings, that of the Kantian *sensus communis*, or the community of taste, and examines it in two ways, by means of two non-exclusive questions: is the artist the one who is entitled to «speak on behalf of all of us» (as the title of the essay says), or are the artworks those that universally address us? He puts to work the normative spirit of Kant's philosophy in order to plead for an ethical responsibility of art to create a kind

of *con-sense* based precisely on this community of sense. And his verdict is that it is the address of the artwork that is universal, and not the mandate of the artist. Howard Caygill, who teaches at the University of London and is also interested in Kantian aesthetics, changes the slant of de Duve's question, stressing the «ought to» of the judgment of taste, and implies that we might be better off asking whether artworks must stir such an universal response. As a consequence, he signals the risk of using art not as a possible common ground, but as a self-evident one. Taking up arguments about the creation and destruction of art, he questions the right of artworks to last indefinitely and claims for them a right to pass away — analogous to humans' right to euthanasia —, given the often artificial manner in which they are «kept in existence» (p. 167). De Duve's therapeutic answer surfaces an underlying unacquainted concern with the care, rather than the destruction, of artworks in Caygill's account: if artworks can die, that only makes them more human. Therefore they need to be taken care of, much in the way that humans care for each other.

The last encounter is that of W.J.T. Mitchell, professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago, and Griselda Pollock, professor of History of Art at the University of Leeds. Mitchell investigates the seemingly dysfunctional role that mass media images play today compared to the role pictures might have played during the Vietnam War, when they were invested a partial responsibility for ending the war. He diagnoses the present circumstances with the name of clonophobia, that is, an all-pervasive fear manifest in our relation to images, similar to the fear prompted by the possibility of cloning, created by science. This covert terror would lend images life, a form of life analogous to human life, at a symbolic level. Pollock is not sure that employing a journalistic metaphor such as

«cloning terror» makes justice to what really happens out there, where terror is far from being a war of images, but one that causes «indescribable mutilation and suffering» (p. 209). She builds her arguments around the same kind of petrifying and politically-charged images, but stresses different facets — she detects a difference in positioning when focusing on the indexicality of a photograph (which involves an ethical stance, that of addressing the act of violence), from attending to it as a cultural object, which aestheticizes it. Primarily concerned with the pain such images inflict — the «pain of others» Susan Sontag had written on (p. 224) —, Pollock thinks that a different treatment applied to images of violence can «pacify and sublimate this pain», allowing for a mourning that makes the trauma bearable (p. 230). In this she mainly refers to Bracha Ettinger's work, who combines photography and painting into a practice she calls *matrixial*, that mostly blurs the traumatic content. This matrixial technique might have a latent reference — by means of the etymological root of the word *matrix* — to the maternal act of soothing the pain, by hiding that which cannot be seen.

On many occasions, in the course of the volume, the discussions migrate without difficulty from aesthetics to ethics, morality or politics. One could notice that what is good about it is that, if the slide from an aesthetic talk to an ethical one is so smooth and unnoticeable, there really are reasons to invoke a current semi-overlapping of the spheres. However, it can also be that the book is in need of a clearer focus, and the parts give the sense of being *a posteriori* reassembled, by means of the artifice of the reciprocal answers of the partakers involved in each «dialogue». In which case, the dialogue would continue to be missing — and not only here, but in the culture at large too —, while the lectures — that were originally given at

Tate Modern in London, the Mecca of art and the artworld — would go back to their status of «single» pieces. The ambition of offering a cross-field dialogue appears therefore to be an ideal not so easily delivered in practice, and maybe even endangered from within, manifesting itself as a polite desire to

render an overall sense of exchange to an otherwise disparate sum of theoretical positions.

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CATALÀ DOMÈNECH, Josep M. (2010)
La imagen interfaz: Representación audiovisual y conocimiento en la era de la complejidad
 Bilbao: Universitat del País Basc, 391 p.

La revista *Time* va dedicar la primera portada de 1983 a l'ordinador. Per primera vegada en la història del magazín, la portada que havia de mostrar el personatge de l'any no anava dedicada a una persona, sinó a una màquina. Naturalment, la importància que concedia aquesta coneguda publicació a l'ordinador no es referia només a l'utensili electrònic, sinó, sobretot, a la seva capacitat de sintetitzar els trets fonamentals d'una nova època. L'ordinador com a interfície sobre la qual s'han pogut construir models discursius com ara l'hipertext, el World Wide Web i la imatge digital (de naturalesa ben diferent de la imatge analògica) és un símbol tant de la transformació del nostre entorn tècnic com de models nous de representació de la realitat, d'estructuració del saber, de fonamentació de valors morals, polítics i ideològics de la nostra societat global i, al cap i a la fi, d'una nova manera de pensar pròpia de l'ésser humà en l'anomenada «postmodernitat». O aquest és, si més no, l'abast filosòfic i antropològic de la forma interfacial que Josep M. Català Domènech defensa a *La imagen interfaz: Representación audiovisual y conocimiento en la era de la complejidad*.

Josep M. Català és catedràtic de Comunicació Audiovisual a la UAB i un dels pocs experts en teoria de la imatge

que encara defensen les ciències de la comunicació com la més humanística de totes les disciplines, com aquella part del saber que, per no caure en la perversitat del pensament tecnocràtic i la deshumanització actual de les ciències socials, ha de recuperar la reflexió filosòfica en tots els seus àmbits (epistemològic, ètic i estètic). A partir d'algunes de les seves darreres obres, generalment erudites i extenses, com ara *La imagen compleja* (2005) i *La forma de lo real* (2008), es pot albirar una idea del seu projecte de sistematitzar la concepció de la imatge i de la cultura visual que correspon a la nostra època. *La imagen interfaz*, que recull força reflexions de les seves obres anteriors, constitueix una passa més en la culminació d'aquesta teoria. L'autor hi desenvolupa una epistemologia de la interfície d'àmplies resonàncies i aplicacions, tan àmplies que en realitat podrien presentar-se com una filosofia de la interfície que inclou una ètica i una estètica. Alhora, dóna resposta a les múltiples qüestions que s'hi relacionen (desaparició de l'escriptura, pensament visual, hiperrealitat, narrativa dels videojocs, etc.), i no estalvia esforços ni pàgines a passar revista a les darreres aportacions dels teòrics en aquest àmbit. Llàstima que aquesta complexitat de temes i de nivells de discurs, que s'ordena